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MARKUS VINZENT

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PEETERS

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# The Skeireins: A Neglected Text

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## ABSTRACT

The only significant non-Biblical record of the Gothic language of Late Antiquity is a commentary on the *Gospel of John*, known as the *Skeireins*. Although much examined by historical linguists, it has been neglected by theologians, with the exception of the late K. Schäferdiek. This article introduces the text, makes observations about its theology, and shows that the *Skeireins* should not be fitted simplistically into the Trinitarian debates which modern historiography sees as the chief feature of the period of its composition.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Christianity began to spread among the Goths, a Germanic people living on Rome's borders in what is now Romania and Ukraine. Its first exponents were Romans captured and enslaved, and subsequently integrated into the Gothic social structure. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, one descendent of such captives was ordained in Constantinople as a bishop for these Goths. After a persecution by pagan Gothic leaders, he and his flock fled to the Roman Empire, and settled in Moesia. There the bishop, whose name is Ulfilas in our sources (thought to represent Gothic 'Wulfila'), created a new alphabet in which to write Gothic, and undertook a translation of the Bible into his people's vernacular. Approximately two thirds of the New Testament survive, and provide our main record of the Gothic language.

Also attested is a Gothic commentary on the *Gospel of John*, dubbed the *Skeireins* (Gothic 'Explanation') by its first modern editor, H. Massmann in 1834.<sup>1</sup> Eight pages survive of a much longer work: five in Codex Ambrosianus E in Milan, and three in Codex Vaticanus Latinus 5750. All are palimpsest, written over with later Latin, and they are no longer in order. The readings improved dramatically in the 1950's when W. Bennett examined the manuscripts under ultraviolet light.<sup>2</sup> The following chart correlates the page numbers (in Arabic numerals) of the codices as found with the presumed order of the leaves in the original (in Roman numerals). While this order is fairly certain because of the progression of the commentary through *John*, it is possible that

<sup>1</sup> *Skeireins aiwaggeljons pairh iohannen, Auslegung des Evangelii Johannis in Gotischer Sprache* (Munich).

<sup>2</sup> *The Gothic Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York, 1960).

other, lost leaves intervened. The beginning and end of each leaf is lost. Scripture quotations accord with the Gothic New Testament of Wulfila and its main manuscript, the Codex Argenteus.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Ambrosianus E	113/4	77/8			79/80	309/10	111/2	
Vaticanus Latinus 5750			59/60	61/2				57/8

- Leaf *I* treats the need for God to become man, and John the Baptist's recognition hereof (*John* 1:29).
- *II* comments upon Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus (*John* 3:1-21), using Jesus' injunction to be 'born of water and spirit' (*John* 3:5) to begin an extended discussion of baptism
- The focus returns in leaves *III* and *IV* to John the Baptist, in accordance with the text (*John* 3:22-36). *IV* also attacks Sabellius and Marcellus (of Ancyra) for claiming that the Father and the Son are one.
- *V* continues this attack with citations from *John* 5:19-23.
- Leaf *VI* is once again concerned with John the Baptist, and Jesus' words at *John* 5:35-6.
- Leaf *VII* discusses the Feeding of the Five Thousand (*John* 6:1-15).
- A leaf is likely missing here, since the events in leaf *VIII*, the Jewish leaders' unbelief and rebuke by Nicodemus (*John* 7:45-52), are considerably farther along in the Gospel than expected by the pace set so far.
- Since the surviving text ends here, we cannot know whether the commentator saw fit to mention the *Pericope de Adultera* which follows in some manuscripts, or whether he moved on directly to Jesus' continuing dialogues with the Pharisees.

Critical consideration of the *Skeireins* has centred upon the question of whether it was composed in Gothic or translated from Greek.<sup>3</sup> It was noted by Massmann at the time of its first publication in 1834 that at the only point where their surviving fragments overlap, there is a strong resemblance to the lost Gospel commentary of Theodore of Heraclea, a 4<sup>th</sup> century eastern bishop.<sup>4</sup> This argument has been developed further by Knut Schäferdiek, the only theologian to

<sup>3</sup> See R. del Pezzo, *La Skeireins – Testo, traduzione, glossario* (Naples, 1973), 18.

<sup>4</sup> "Bishop of Heraclea in Thrace, he published in the reign of the emperor Constantius commentaries on *Matthew* and *John*, on the Epistles and on the *Psalter*. These are written in a polished and clear style and show an excellent historical sense." – St Jerome, *Lives of the Illustrious Men* XC. More on his life in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon* XXIV, 1479-85. The relevant commentary section in *Johanneskommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*, ed. J. Reuss (Berlin, 1966), 72, frg. 27.

take a significant interest in this text.<sup>5</sup> The language of composition is certainly an interesting linguistic and historical question, but it will be passed over here in favour of some theological observations about the commentator's anthropology, Christology, and of course Trinitarian theology.

The commentator's anthropology is dualistic: Man's nature is twofold, body and soul. The requirement that man be born again of water and the Spirit does not entail two actions, but a dual rebirth in Baptism. Indeed, God crafted Baptism to match our natures: '... *mann us missaleikom wistim us satidamma: Us saiwalai raihtis jah leika*' (*Skeireins II c-d*).<sup>6</sup> This anthropology is not in itself remarkable, but it defines the parameters of the commentator's Christology: Although never argued for in the text, it is clear that the *Skeireins*' author argues from a logos / sarx Christology. That is, Christ had the body of a man, but in place of a man's soul, the eternal, divine Logos. '*In-uh þis nu jah leik mans andnam: ei laisareis uns wairþai þizos du guda garaihteins*' (*I d*).<sup>7</sup> This view of the Incarnation was once associated by scholars with Arianism and Arius,<sup>8</sup> but is now seen as a more general feature.<sup>9</sup>

The principal concern of the commentator is to refute Sabellianism, temporarily represented by Marcellus of Ancyra: '... *ni in þis þatainei ei frauþins mikilein gakannidedi: ak du gatarhjan jah gasakan þo afgudon haifst: Sabailiaus jah Markailliaus: þaiei ainana anananþidedun qipan attan jah sunu*' (*IV d*).<sup>10</sup> Every Scriptural passage that shows the Father and the Son as distinct in will or authority is thus emphasized: '... *"nih þan atta ni stojþ ainohun. ak staua alla atgaf sunau" Ip nu ains jah sa sama wesi bi Sabailliaus insahtai: missaleikaim bandwiþs namnamhwaiva stojan jah ni stojan sa sama mahtedi?*' (*V b-c*).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, passages that accentuate their oneness are downplayed:

*þata qipano: 'ei allai sweraina sunu, swaswe swerand attan', ni ibnon ak galeika sweripa usgiban uns laiseiþ. jah silba nasjands bi siponjans bidjands du attin qap: 'ei frijos ins, swaswe frijos mik'. ni ibnaleika frijaþwa ak galeika þairh þata ustaikneiþ. (V d)*

<sup>5</sup> *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 110 (1981), 175-93.

<sup>6</sup> '... man, to be sure, being put together of various natures, of soul, that is, and body.' The translations in this article are my own, with reference to those of J. Marchand and W. Bennett, available at the excellent online Skeireins Project, <http://www.gotica.de/skeireins>.

<sup>7</sup> '... He took on even the body of man; that He might become a teacher of justice according to God.'

<sup>8</sup> For full references, see W.P. Haugaard, 'Arius: Twice a Heretic? Arius and the Human Soul of Jesus Christ', *Church History* 29 (1960), 251-63.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, A. Grillmeier, who introduced the term 'Logos/sarx', shows that Athanasius thought in this way. *Christ in the Christian Tradition* (London, 1965), I 314.

<sup>10</sup> '... not for this reason alone, that he [St John] might declare the greatness of the Lord, but to censure and rebuke the godless contention of Sabellius and Marcellius, who were so bold as to say that the Father and the Son are one.'

<sup>11</sup> 'Neither does the Father judge anyone, but has given all judgment to the Son. But now if he were one and the same according to the view of Sabellius, signified by different names, how could the same one judge and not judge?'

... the passage, 'that all may honour the Son as they honour the Father' teaches us to offer not equal but a similar honour, and the Saviour Himself praying for the disciples said to the Father 'that You love them even as You love Me'. Through that He designates not the same but similar love.

The above passage has also been thought apposite to the most obvious Trinitarian question about the *Skeireins*, namely whether it advances the Homoianism espoused by Wulfila and most Goths. Unfortunately, no answer can definitively be given. Exactly how to translate the underlined words in the passage above is a serious limitation: The semantic cartography of these lexemes for 'likeness' and 'sameness' is difficult to delineate. At issue are Gothic *ibna*, *galeiks*, and *ibnaleika*. Schäferdiek<sup>12</sup> would have *ibna* designate 'numerical' equality, that is, if *ibna* honour were given to the Father and the Son, it would be one and the same honour. In rejecting this, the commentator is still only combating Sabellius and Marcellus, not making a necessarily Homoian claim. However, *ibna* and *galeiks* are contrasted elsewhere in the *Skeireins*, and do not appear to be susceptible to this analysis: ... *nasjands ... ni ibna nih galeiks unsarai garaihtein ak silba garaihteī wisands* (Ia).<sup>13</sup> It seems unlikely that the commentator felt he had to rule out the Saviour being numerically one and the same as our (implicitly flawed) righteousness or justice; it is unclear what it would mean if He were. On the other hand, Schäferdiek is on balance probably right to rule out Dietrich's suggestion<sup>14</sup> that *ibnaleika* is to be understood as a calque on Greek ὁμοούσιος.<sup>15</sup>

If a concrete teaching must be taken from *Skeireins* V d, perhaps the easiest to discern is subordinationism. *Ibna* would mean 'equal', and *galeiks* 'like, similar', with *ibnaleika* perhaps 'exactly the same'. The commentator argues that 'as' (*swaswe*) does not imply exactly the same honour being rendered to both Persons, but merely similar.<sup>16</sup> Not unlike logos / sarx Christology, a hierarchical Trinity would not necessarily conflict with any mainstream theology of the period. It is certainly the case that the Son's subordination to the Father is entailed by and thus a feature of Arian and Homoian teaching, but not distinctively so.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> 'Theologiegeschichtliche Bemerkungen zur Skeireins', in *Gotica Minora Prima* (Hanau, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> '... a Saviour ... not equal to nor like our righteousness, but Himself being righteousness.'

<sup>14</sup> *Die Bruchstücke der Skeireins* (Strasburg, 1903), lxix.

<sup>15</sup> Schäferdiek is certainly correct that reference to οὐσία does not fit with the commentator's point, although it is just possible that the *Skeireins*' author might have deployed his opponents' shibboleth here purely for another chance to negate it (though ὁμοούσιος becomes a shibboleth surprising late in the controversy, perhaps too late for Theodore of Heraclea).

<sup>16</sup> St Augustine draws the same distinction, in of course a difference context and to different effect, in his Homily IV on 1John, section 9, commenting on 1John 3:7.

<sup>17</sup> The many church historians who take any hint of subordinationism to be dispositive of an anti-Nicene position have affirmed the consequent.



Thus, in its anthropology, Christology, and Trinitarian theology, the *Skeireins* offers a window into a largely forgotten theological world. Many of the commentary's statements were likely commonplaces in its day, though positions like logos / sarx Christology or Trinitarian subordinationism were in the course of subsequent theological strife identified as heretical. In fact, ironically, when the *Skeireins* engages polemically (with Marcellus of Ancyra), from the point of view of the final Trinitarian settlement it remains orthodox, but when it unassumingly discusses the dual nature of Baptism, or the honour due to God, it becomes heretical.

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MARKUS VINZENT

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